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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000737

SIPDIS

AF/S FOR B. NEULING
NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: URBAN TENSIONS BOILING OVER

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Clashes between residents and police over the high profile destruction of unauthorized structures around town and the city's growing failure to deliver services have increased political tension in the capital. Police presence and roadblocks are markedly increasing, including outside the capital. Some members of the opposition MDC are involved in the growing urban resistance to the regime, but the activity for the most part seems to be spontaneous or directed by citizens groups rather than by the MDC leadership. END SUMMARY.

Blitz on Informal Sector Sparks Protests

¶12. (U) On May 18, the City commenced "Operation Restore Order" - a crackdown against "illegal structures" and the informal sector generally. According to police reports, more than 10,000 people have been arrested and hundreds of illegal structures - vending stalls and makeshift residences - have been demolished through May 26. While most high profile demolitions have been in and around Harare, police reportedly have leveled some flea markets in other locations, including Bulawayo, Kadoma, Rusape, and Odzi. In addition, the state media reported that police had arrested hundreds of additional individuals around the country for illegal gold panning and other unauthorized activities. Various government officials publicly attribute the campaign to the imperative to stem "economic saboteurs" and purportedly growing illegal activities associated with the outdoor markets, including everything from forex dealings to rape.

¶13. (SBU) In response to the crackdown, protests have broken out around Harare over the past week. In the high density areas of Chitungwiza and Mabvuku, protests led to violent clashes between police and city residents on May 20. James Gadzirayi, spokesperson of the Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA) told poloff on May 24 that the street battles were spontaneous reactions to police demolition efforts and not the result of pre-planned resistance.

¶14. (SBU) More clashes erupted on May 25 in Glen View, St. Mary's, and Budiriro, resulting in reported damage to vehicles and buildings, including vandalism of a municipal office in Glen View. There are unconfirmed reports that a policeman was killed in one disturbance. Human rights NGOs so far have been unable to confirm any injuries associated with the clashes.

Tafara and Mabvuku Disturbances

¶15. (C) Street battles on the margins of "Restore Order" follow earlier clashes over rising municipal fees and non-delivery in low-income areas. At a meeting with poloff on May 18, CHRA representatives offered an update on deteriorating conditions in Harare's high-density areas. According to the group, some areas have been without water for two months, had not had trash removed all year, or were increasingly exposed to open raw sewage. Citizens were digging wells in filthy areas, contributing to a growing health hazard. The City rarely, if ever, responded to resident complaints. The group advised that at the same time, the City was drastically increasing fees for municipal services - services that were rarely if ever delivered. The new fee structures are unaffordable to most residents of high-density areas.

¶16. (C) After the Revenue Office announced new illegal structure fees earlier this month, many residents refused to pay. According to CHRA representatives, a ZANU-PF women's group called a meeting on May 10 to address the matter in Tafara, a low-income suburb. No ZANU-PF leaders came and when the meeting began to be dominated by CHRA representatives, police dispersed the meeting and arrested three CHRA members. A similar event in Mabvuku, another high-density suburb was broken up May 11, resulting in 14 arrests. Those detained in each case were charged with violations of the Public Order and Security Act and released within two days.

17. (C) CHRA sources report that police presence was quickly and substantially increased in high-density areas on the heels of the Tafara and Mabvuku incidents. Non-uniformed ZANU-PF militia, another growing presence, were harassing - and sometimes beating - those perceived to be involved in resistance efforts against the city. In a drive through Mabvuku and Tafara on May 25, a holiday, poloff observed uniformed police walking among pedestrians on fairly crowded streets, but saw no roadblocks in either township or on commuter arteries to the city. Embassy personnel generally have noticed a markedly increased police profile and proliferation of roadblocks around the country during the past few weeks.

Conditions Deteriorating

18. (SBU) Evidence of growing urban hardship is everywhere. With the petrol shortage, commuter buses on the road are far fewer, leading to large crowds of stranded commuters along roadsides and bus stops all over town. The GOZ compounded the problem by recently requiring that bus routes go no further than depots on the edge of town, and not into the city center. Business contacts tell us that they are having to provide overnight accommodation for employees no longer able to commute home reliably. No longer confined principally to high-density areas, growing trash piles and water cut-offs have been plaguing Harare's tony suburbs in recent months as well.

Organized Civil Disobedience

19. (C) CHRA representatives told us they are organizing boycotts against payment of all municipal charges and are planning to clandestinely re-connect water services cut-off by the City for non-payment. The Association was also gathering petitions and demonstrating for new mayoral elections to replace the ZANU-PF-led commission that has been operating since the MDC mayor and council were dismissed last year. The representatives said they are coordinating closely with the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), the Legal Resources Foundation, Amani Trust, the Zimbabwe Community Development Trust, and, more recently, an association of informal traders impacted by the crackdown. They noted that over the past few months, sympathetic local ZANU-PF members and leaders, police, and municipal figures ave been quietly collaborating with CHRA, even if they could not be publicly supportive. ZLHR contacts tell us that they are planning to file citizens suits against the government over the crackdown, but so far have had a hard time locating citizens willing to stand as plaintiffs.

MDC in the Background

10. (C) According to CHRA representatives, the MDC has not been involved in the planning of any of the citizen resistance efforts, although MDC members, including members of parliament, have been involved in some of the citizen protests and activities. MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai and other party officials have lashed out publicly against the crackdown generally, casting it as retribution against urban populations for voting against the ruling party. MDC spokesperson Paul Themba Nyathi accused the GOZ of trying to provoke strife so it could declare a state of emergency to help control public reaction to the collapsing economy. MDC MP for Glen Norah Priscilla Misihairabwa-Mushonga reportedly claimed to be weighing legal action on behalf of residents against the City.

Why Now?

11. (C) The timing and justification for the crackdown probably stem from several factors. Constant headline coverage in the state media suggests "Restore Order" is meant to project GOZ's purported zero tolerance for illegal forex trading and the black market for controlled commodities. Certainly, it is in keeping with the ruling party's ongoing designs to expand its control over the economy and symptomatic of its continued failure to reverse the country's economic decline. The crackdown further substantiates the GOZ's purported scapegoating of "economic saboteurs" for the failure of its economic policies, and seeks to portray the GOZ as "doing something."

12. (C) The MDC claims the crackdown is retribution for voting patterns. This may also be part of the explanation. Certainly the fact that the targeted areas are pro-MDC is a further spur to the government. There is also speculation in the independent media that the ruling party is interested in

orienting the nation's population away from increasingly restive urban centers to rural areas, which are much easier to manipulate and control. According to official media reports, most arrested in Harare are being processed at a farm outside of Harare and reportedly are being pressed to return to their rural homes if they have no authorized business or residence in Harare. ZLHR contacts report that none have been forcibly relocated, however, and most are charged with minor offenses and released after payment of a fine.

Comment

¶13. (C) Does this crackdown - coming so quickly on the heels of another stolen election and compounding the suffering of a nation reeling from GOZ economic mismanagement - tip the country closer to change? With the exception of food riots in 1998, growing privation in the past has provoked more emigration and creative adaptation than real impetus for change. However, many local observers note that economic conditions have never been this bad. Whether the GOZ follows through in its public commitment to enforce its draconian new zero tolerance approach may prove to be a pivotal factor. The crackdown comes in the wake of growing shortages, including most staples, and the GOZ's approach seems deliberately designed to deprive the urban population of its coping and survival mechanisms.

¶14. (C) This has led to speculation that the regime is intentionally driving people to the edge to provoke a confrontation that will allow it to unleash its still disciplined police force, which is capable of violence when the regime feels it necessary. At this point there does not appear to be an organization effectively channeling public anger into pressure for political change. Unless a responsible leadership emerges, the prospects of increasingly radical mob activity will grow, and with it the likelihood of uncontrolled violence.

DELL